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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: THE DREAM, THE REALITY

REF: RABAT 0746

Classified By: Ambassador Samuel L. Kaplan for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In late September, an interagency embassy team enjoyed the unique opportunity to travel to both sides of the "berm," the 1,500-kilometer stone and sand wall that separates Moroccan-administered Western Sahara from the POLISARIO-controlled areas. The situation on the ground underscored that while the GOM-supported autonomy option for the region is not without problems, it remains the most viable medium-term solution. Meanwhile, a small minority, dreams of independence for Western Sahara appear to be an unlikely reality. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) An embassy team consisting of the Defense Attache, Army Attache, and Deputy Political Counselor visited the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in Laayoune September 22-25. Warmly welcomed by MINURSO staff, who see only 12-15 visitors per year, the team received briefings on MINURSO operations and visited Team Sites on both sides of the berm. In addition to the Force Commander, Team Site commanders, political advisors, and MINURSO staff, the embassy team met with the African Union Senior Representative to MINURSO and with UNHCR Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) staff.

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THE VIEW FROM TWO SIDES OF THE BERM  
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¶3. (SBU) Because they were traveling under UN auspices, the embassy team had the unique opportunity to travel to MINURSO Team Sites on the eastern side of the berm aboard a UN helicopter as part of its regularly scheduled route. The landscapes southeast of the berm -- in the areas ostensibly controlled by the POLISARIO -- are forbidding and inhospitable. The birds-eye view revealed the seemingly endless desolation of the desert in which the only signs of life were scrub vegetation and the occasional small herd of goats. Opportunities for viable economic activities appear sparse, at best. The town of Tifriti, suggested as a potential tourist attraction and source of revenue in the region, was barely visible from the low-flying helicopter. When the team touched down at Team Site Bir Lahlou, there was noticeable in the distance a small, run-down shack, but no indication that anyone lived there. Viewed from the air, the white walls and fences around the Team Sites accentuate the vast brownness surrounding them.

¶4. (C) All this offered a sharp contrast to the Moroccan-administered areas north and west of the berm. Laayoune, the regional capital, has a population of as many as 200,000 people, with government offices and commercial districts. The city is young and has grown rapidly since the Spanish began developing the area in the 1940s. Most of the construction is newer, dating from the early 1990s after the

conclusion of the cease-fire and the end of armed conflict between Moroccan and POLISARIO forces. Some of the older residential and commercial districts resemble similar areas in Rabat, Casablanca or other Mediterranean cities, while the city continues to grow. The region has rich fisheries and extensive deposits of phosphates, the exploitation of which may provide some of the capital that drives growth. Most, however, comes from the Moroccan Government, which has injected significant development funding and other economic stimulus into the region. In addition to supporting the administrative personnel who staff the various government offices, MINURSO reports that the GOM has an estimated 120-150,000 troops stationed in the Western Sahara along the berm, which we were told they maintain meticulously. (COMMENT: Other observers who have visited the berm report that the state of repair varies enormously and is often dependent upon the importance that the local Moroccan commander assigns to maintenance. END COMMENT.)

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MINURSO: JUST THE FACTS (NO OPINIONS)  
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15. (C) MINURSO and other UN personnel have a unique role in the Western Sahara and must carefully walk a very fine -- and very apolitical -- line. All MINURSO interlocutors were professional and courteous, engaging in discussion that was, at times, animated. However, they rarely offered personal insights or reflections on the mission. On one occasion, one officer intimated that the POLISARIO may exert "pressure" to ensure that families from the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria who travel west of the berm to visit family members under the UNHCR-sponsored CMBs actually return to the camps, but he would not elaborate. (COMMENT: Clearly it would not be in the POLISARIO's interests for large numbers of camp residents to abandon them for a better life in the Morocco-controlled areas west of the berm. While the embassy team did not visit the camps around Tindouf, we were told by many interlocutors, including the UNHCR CBM Program Director, that living conditions were exceedingly difficult. END COMMENT.)

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AFRICAN UNION VIEWS  
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16. (C) Other international representatives appeared more free to speak their minds. The African Union Senior Representative, Ambassador Yilma Tadesse, has served in Laayoune for 12 years. He discussed at length the history of the conflict and the various efforts to resolve it, noting that the AU has, since the beginning, been closely involved in attempts to broker an agreement. Tadesse reiterated the AU's position, which is based on the "principled resolution" that the people should decide. When it was suggested that the withdrawal of more than 100,000 Moroccan troops from the region in the event Western Sahara gained independence could destabilize the region, Ambassador Tadesse disagreed, adding that other issues, i.e., regional security and stability, could be dealt with after the status was resolved. He admitted, however, that they were difficult issues.

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KEEPING IT REAL  
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17. (C) COMMENT: The brief visit was limited in scope, but it added insight into the situation on the ground in Western Sahara. The harsh environment in the entire area makes life difficult, but Moroccan investment west of the berm, especially in Laayoune and Dakhla, has created a sense of normalcy. Citizens go about their lives as students, shopkeepers, businessmen, bureaucrats, etc. To our knowledge, Moroccans and others do not relocate to Laayoune to seek better lives, and some youth there, like many places, seek to leave. However, the city has been created by Morocco, and enough basic infrastructure and commerce with the rest of Morocco exist to support economic life in the

area. The reality on the other side of the berm simply does not support the dream, held by some, of an independent, economically viable Western Saharan state. END COMMENT.

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<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Moro> cco  
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